

Why Study Mexico?

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Sergio Gutierrez was born in Chihuahua, Mexico in 1955 and came to the United States the following year with his parents, brothers and sisters. Moving with the change of seasons and working in the fields of California's agricultural valleys, Sergio and his family were to eventually settle permanently in southwestern Idaho. Graduating from Idaho public schools and earning a degree from Boise State University, Sergio was doing what thousands of Mexican immigrants have done: immigrate, assimilate, succeed and contribute. What makes Mr. Gutierrez's story unique is that he is now Judge Gutierrez of the Idaho Court of Appeals, the first Latino appointee in our state's history. Many expect that one day he will occupy a seat on the Idaho Supreme Court.

Judge Gutierrez's parents brought the family to Idaho for the same reasons that attract the growing influx of Latinos today: jobs and opportunity. With Mexico's staggering degree of poverty--as well as its struggle to provide the necessities of education, medical care and a jurisprudence system free of corruption, infrastructures expected in a democracy--Idaho is seen as a land of unlimited opportunity for people willing to work hard. Like the thousands of European and Asian immigrants who flocked to Idaho in the late 1800's to seek their fortunes in the mining camps, Latinos in Idaho are presently working in agriculture, the service industries and as professionals in education, medicine, computer engineering, and as noted, at the highest levels of our state's judiciary.

Idaho and Mexico have an interconnected history that goes back before statehood. Vaquero and packer Jesus Urquides ran a prosperous business hauling supplies between Boise and the mines of southern Idaho. Hundreds of Mexicans worked as miners throughout the state and have given numerous towns, cities, creeks and lakes their names: Orofino, Orogrande, Alturas, to name a few. In the early 1900's over 60% of the labor force working on the numerous railroad lines that crossed our state were Mexican immigrants. Since the 1920's and continuing to the present, there has been a significant Latino workforce in all aspects of agriculture and stock production. Idaho farmers and ranchers acknowledge that without the efforts and sacrifices of Latino field hands and vaqueros, running a successful farm or ranch today might be nearly impossible.

As Idaho public schools teachers, it will be our responsibility to teach our current and future students--Anglos, Latinos, Asians, African-Americans, etc.--the rich history that connects our state and the country of Mexico. With Latino growth in Idaho expected to reach 160,000 in 2015 and 200,000 in 2025, we have an opportunity to teach the lessons of inclusion, tolerance and acceptance to a new generation of Idahoans, something that few immigrant peoples have enjoyed. These are lessons worth fighting for.